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Keys to Life warns teenagers about consequences of underage drinking

By encouraging students to not drink and drive, area officials hope the high percentage of alcohol-related automobile accidents will decrease during special events, such as prom and high school graduation.

Keys to Life, a program started in October 2001 through a grant by the governor's Highway Safety Program, is implemented in Catawba County through Alcohol and Substance Abuse Prevention (ASAP), a community coalition to prevent underage substance abuse.

"We want Catawba County students to celebrate special events in a legal matter and not put themselves and others at risk by - drinking and then driving carelessly," said ASAP Chairwoman Louise Ackerman.

A recent survey conducted in the three Catawba County school systems – Catawba County Schools, Newton-Conover City Schools and Hickory City Schools – revealed that 65 percent of 12th graders have used alcohol in the last 12 months. In addition, national statistics show that every 15 minutes someone is killed or seriously injured in an alcohol-related automobile crash.

The Keys to Life program's long-range objective is to heighten awareness of the consequences of underage alcohol use, with an emphasis around special occasions or events such as prom.

One high school in each school system will have a Keys to Life program. The high schools chosen for this year include Hickory High School, Newton-Conover High School and Bandys High School. Thirty-two students at each high school will be given black Keys to Life T-shirts to wear throughout the day representing a walking reminder of the dangers of underage alcohol use.

Hickory High's event will start at 10:50 a.m. April 23 when a mock alcohol vehicle stop will be presented at the school with student participants and officers from the Hickory Police Department. This vehicle stop will coincide with the lunch periods and run from 10:50 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The day will conclude with an assembly from 1:15-2:25 p.m. in the HHS gymnasium. This assembly will feature a Keys to Life - presentation and speakers from local law enforcement and the District Attorney's office.

The program at Newton-Conover and Bandys high schools will include a display presented in the school representing the 32 individuals who will be killed or seriously injured during the eight hour school day. T-shirts will be hung with the students name on the shirt.

Beginning at 11 a.m. (April 19 for NCHS and April 22 for BHS) at each school, a mock accident scene will be presented at the school with student victims, EMS, first responders and area law enforcement. The day will conclude at 2:40 p.m. at each school after a presentation by area officials.

Also at each high school, local law enforcement agencies will have available "fatal vision" goggles for the students to try. The goggles simulate various levels of impairment. Students will be allowed to wear the goggles and then attempt to walk a straight line.

Those partnering with ASAP to bring Keys to Life to the schools include the District Attorney's office, N.C. Alcohol Law Enforcement, Catawba County Public Health, Catawba County Mental Health Partners, The Cognitive Connection, Catawba County Sheriff's Office, Hickory Police Department, Newton Police Department, N.C. Highway Patrol and Catawba County Chamber of Commerce.

ASAP is a volunteer coalition of Catawba County residents with members from all sectors of the community, including education, law enforcement, the criminal justice system, the faith community, mental health, social services, public health, local business, parents and youth.

The coalition is part of Catawba County Health Partners, a local Healthy Carolinians partnership organized to enhance the quality of life for all people in Catawba County. Health Partners currently focuses on four health priorities: Access to health care, childhood obesity, substance abuse and cancer.

To learn more about ASAP or the Keys to Life program, please contact Ackerman at (828) 327-2788 or visit www.catawbacountyhealthpartners.org.

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